

Six honored with Governor’s Humanities Awards

Six Montanans will be recognized during the Governor’s Humanities Awards Ceremony at 3 p.m. Feb. 19 in the State Capitol Rotunda in Helena. Governor Steve Bullock will officiate. Honorees are Philip Aaberg, Chester; Jack Gladstone, Babb; Yvonne Gastineau Gritzner, Florence; Kirby Lambert, Helena; Dr. Richard E. Littlebear, Lame Deer; and William Rossiter, Kalispell. The ceremony is free and open to the public.

A banquet follows the ceremony, with no-host cocktails at 6 p.m. and a dinner and program at 7 p.m. at the Red Lion Colonial Inn. Brent Musburger serves as keynote speaker and will be recognized as a Friend of Humanities Montana.

The awards were established in 1995 by Gov. Marc Racicot to honor achievement in humanities scholarship and service and enhancement of public appreciation of the humanities, and presented every two years by Humanities Montana.

About the 2015 recipients:
Philip Aaberg is a world-renowned musician and dedicated music educator who has shown a special commitment to cultural enrichment on the Hi-Line.

Jack Gladstone is a gifted musician who has invested his talent and heart in preserving and sharing the Blackfeet people’s cultural heritage.



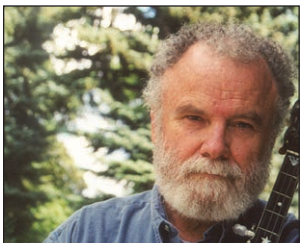
Dr. Richard E. Littlebear



Kirby Lambert



Phillip Aaberg (Kelly Gorham photo)



William Rossiter



Yvonne Gastineau Gritzner



Jack Gladstone

Yvonne Gastineau Gritzner is a long-time humanities advocate who has supported public programs through her work with organizations such as Humanities Montana and MotanaPBS.

Kirby Lambert is a Western historian, Charlie Russell scholar, and long-time program director at the Montana Historical Society who has advanced public humanities immeasurably.

Dr. Richard E. Littlebear, president of Chief Dull Knife College on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, has shown unstinting support for Native American educational

efforts and for the revitalization of all indigenous languages – especially the Cheyenne language.

William Rossiter is a retired English professor at Flathead Valley Community College who has shared his love of Montana history through musical performance for 30 years as a member of Humanities Montana’s Speakers Bureau.

Banquet tickets are \$50; call Humanities Montana at 406-243-6022 or e-mail info@humanitiesmontana.org for details.

Bill Ohrmann (from page 1)

Populating his paintings were cavemen and pilgrims, modern men and women, exploitative conquerors and exploited indigenous people, UFOs and mythical creatures, and animals endangered or extinct.

These figures could be set in idyllic landscapes, as in a work titled “Be Thou Always as a Stranger and a Guest on This Earth,” or ruined wastelands, as in “Devil’s Caretaker.”

He was prolific as well, with a diverse body of work beyond the canvases he produced after retiring from the ranch in 1996.

“It’s pretty amazing that those 250 paintings were all done after the age of 76, but also he did several hundred beautiful wood carvings, many bronzes, liquor bottles, plus the steel sculptures,” John Ohrmann said.

An incredible story

His life, meanwhile, is an “incredible story,” Glueckert said.

Ohrmann was born in 1919 in Philipsburg and raised in Ovando.

His parents died four months apart when he was only 19, leaving the family ranch to him.

He served three years in World War II in the South Pacific and returned to his home state to pursue a quiet life at home. He married his wife of 66 years, Phyllis, and raised his children, John and Susan Peterson, all three of whom survive him.

Art was a lifelong pursuit of his, but he focused on wood carvings and bronze sculptures because of the demands of the ranch. Joe Nickell, who wrote a book on Ohrmann titled *Tainted Revelations*, said the carvings are notable for their technical complexity and mystical subject matter.

Some of his sculptures were shown in museums, and his porcelain liquor bottles sold well.

He began pursuing painting in earnest after he retired, once he knew he’d have time to finish a canvas and wouldn’t be wasting materials.

The self-taught artist’s primary influences were a study in contrasts: Charlie Russell and Dutch expressionist Vincent van Gogh.

From Russell, he took a sense of composition and a love of the landscape, although he pursued vastly different subject matter.

From van Gogh, he learned a high-contrast sense of color and expressive brushwork.

Helping him gain notoriety were the biting political views that he conveyed on his canvases. Ohrmann was unafraid to tackle controversial issues, taking unpopular stands in his home area.

His anti-trapping views were the subject of many paintings, and he viewed the practice as

“cruelty just beyond belief.”

It’s a view toward nature that evolved from one extreme to the other over his long lifetime. When he was young, any animal was fair game.

“You shot an owl just on general principles. Everything like that. And I think that was terrible, really,” he said in an interview earlier this year.

But his outlook changed, and John Ohrmann said his father was an environmentalist before the term was invented.

He maintained a rancher-like sense of humor about his opinions, though.

When the Montana Arts Council selected his work for a two-year, 10-gallery tour of the state, Ohrmann chose the title, “Something to Offend Everyone.”

And outside his gallery is a hand-painted sign that welcomes visitors with a few rules:

- OK to take pictures
- OK to sit on turtles
- OK to let your dogs go out
- OK to think your own thoughts
- Crackpot tho they might well be.

Glueckert said Ohrmann excelled at consistently expressing his views through metaphor without hammering people over the head, a task many artists struggle with.

His work, too, remained approachable to people of all ages.

Phyllis Ohrmann said children were drawn to his metal sculptures, and immediately recognized meanings that often escaped adults.

One picture of a particularly gruesome scene elicited this comment from a child: “They shouldn’t do that.”

In contrast to the sometimes confrontational nature of his art, Ohrmann was known for a self-deprecating demeanor.

When researching his book, Nickell would get answers such as “I just copy van Gogh’s painting style.” Often people would misinterpret the angels and devils in his paintings, when he was wholly opposed to organized religion. He would joke that “the devil made him do it.”

“If there’s any supernatural influence in his work, it surely comes from the divine,” Nickell said.

Glueckert said Ohrmann’s understatement often had a Big Sky Country bite to it. If it was freezing, Ohrmann might simply say that it was “nippy” outside.

Creating works of “enduring meaning and power”

In 1998, Ohrmann began pursuing another medium and created his first steel animal sculpture, a standing grizzly bear made of welded steel plate. It became a separate body



“Bikini Island Test” by Bill Ohrmann (Courtesy of the Missoula Art Museum)

of his work that he created, often with the help of his son John. Close observers and fans delight in pointing out the small doors on each, which open to reveal the animal’s heart.

He’s made fearsome, life-size Kodiak bears and rhinoceros, and birds that appear playful and friendly even as they’ve taken on a handsome rust coloring.

The menagerie populates the yard at the Ohrmann Museum and Gallery, which was built in 2002 to house and share the voluminous works he couldn’t fit in the family home any longer.

The museum draws some 2,500 visitors each year. John Ohrmann said the family plans on keeping it open as long as they can.

One of the rhinos was transported to the Missoula Art Museum this summer for a career-surveys exhibition that came down recently.

Glueckert said the MAM will likely hang one of his paintings in the entrance to commemorate him.

The family suggested that admirers of Ohrmann and his work gather with friends and tell stories to remember him. (Many are sharing their thoughts via Ohrmann’s Facebook page.)

Glueckert, too, said people think deeply about his messages: how they can better treat the Earth and each other.

“He’s an important artist and an important person. We’re very fortunate to have him and have his memory and have his work here,” Glueckert said.

Nickell as well said that Ohrmann’s life and personality resonate with him. Viewers of all ages can contemplate his art and think, “I still have time to do something amazing,” he said.

Instead of mellowing with age, Ohrmann “started saying things that people are afraid to say their entire lives.”

Ultimately, Nickell believes the rancher-artist’s work will have “enduring meaning and power in our state’s artistic and cultural legacies.”

Once an artist has passed, “what’s left is the art. I truly do feel that a century from now there will be people who will still be looking to his art for inspiration or strength to make their own powerful statements,” he said.



How the arts can improve aging

Today, we can expect 30 more years of life than past generations – years that hold tremendous, but often untapped, potential for vitality and contribution.

As we age, our capacity for creativity increases. We seek meaning and connection. Aroha Philanthropies believes the arts are transformative. In a video posted at Grantmakers in the Arts, the organization shows how learning, making and sharing art opens the creative spirit, brings us together, and adds joy to the years after 55. Check it out at www.giarts.org/blog/steve/wall-how-arts-can-improve-aging.